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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000793

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP, INR/NESA, INR/B
DEPT PASS TO USTR FOR JASON BUNTIN
USDOC FOR STEVEN GARRETT

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [EINV](#) [ETRD](#) [PREL](#) [KIPR](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: NEW MINISTER OF CULTURE AND INFORMATION: MODERN
VISION, SERIOUS ABOUT IPR AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

REF: RIYADH 760

Classified By: CDA Ambassador Richard Erdman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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SUMMARY

11. (C) In a June 7 meeting with the Charge, the new Minister of Culture and Information Abdul Aziz Khoja believes the Kingdom cannot avoid the reach of modern technology. A "wise but strong" approach is needed to reconcile traditional values with modernity and protect women's rights. Khoja promised to follow up on the Charge's concerns about the status of intellectual property rights (IPR) protection in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Lebanon until recently, he also expressed high regard for Acting Assistant Secretary Feltman and accurately predicted the victory of the March 14 slate in Lebanon's elections taking place that same day.

EAGER TO BALANCE MODERNITY AND TRADITION

12. (C) On June 7, Charge met with Abdul Aziz Khoja, the recently appointed Minister of Culture and Information, to discuss the Minister's vision for his ministry (MOCI) and to stress the importance the USG attaches to IPR issues. Al-Khoja said up front he conducted his first television interviews with U.S. networks like NBC and ABC, versus Saudi networks, so he could be more serious and frank. The King wants Saudi Arabia to be more pragmatic and practical, and, as a minister, he is trying to strike a balance between progressives and reactionaries in the Kingdom, which is a "difficult, very difficult mission."

13. (C) Khoja emphasized the Kingdom's integration into global media and the internet and how this integration makes it impossible to put off change any longer. While his ministry is in the process of moving television and radio away from government control, Khoja described his overarching priorities as figuring out how to encourage a more open-minded approach to the media and the internet, educating people on the value of some liberalization, and explaining the Kingdom to the outside world. Much needs to be done to reconcile modern global information networks with Saudi culture and values. This will require participation from all parts of society, including working with various religious elements.

14. (C) While acknowledging the challenge posed by satellite TV, Khoja pointed out with obvious confidence that most of

the key satellite broadcasters were heavily invested by Saudi interests. (Note: The lay-out of the Minister's office seemed to confirm rumors that Al-Jazeera has toned down its reporting after major Saudi investment: the minister's wall was dominated by six large TV screens, two of which were broadcasting Al-Jazeera, presumably so he could monitor the channel in real time. End Note)

PROMISED TO FOLLOW UP ON IPR

¶5. (C) When the Charge outlined USG concerns about the lack of strong enforcement of IPR laws and KSA ministries' using pirated software, Khoja immediately called in his deputy minister, Dr. Abdullah Al-Jasser, to provide an update. Jasser requested help in acquiring original software at a lower price and said that MOCI was already working with Microsoft on this issue. This would help address piracy problems. According to Jasser, the Ministry has developed a program with several U.S. companies to increase IPR awareness. MOCI has sent 60 to 65 cases to the Board of Grievances (BOG) for prosecution, and more than half have been fined, though none have been imprisoned. The judges on the BOG fully understand IPR violations, which are viewed as illegal under Shari'a law because they are tantamount to theft. Khoja promised to follow up and requested a list of specific IPR issues (Note: Econcouns is requesting a meeting with MOCI Deputy Minister Abdul Rahman al Hazza and MOCI Director General of copyrights Obdaillah Obdaillah. End Note)

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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¶6. (C) Khoja said MOCI encourages reform with regard to women's rights, but noted that reform had to be gradual, as it is not easy to deal with the Kingdom's more reactionary elements. On the specific issues of a woman's right to drive in Saudi Arabia, Khoja related an anecdote about being lost in the desert 40 years ago, and ultimately being rescued by a Bedouin woman in a pickup truck full of sheep and dogs. "I have to help them, we have to be with women to protect and help them," he said.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Khoja is a former chemistry teacher, and renowned poet, but was also the Kingdom's ambassador to Lebanon (reftel) and was proud of his cooperation with the USG to support the March 14 Movement. While appreciating the importance of academic and artistic freedom, he will honor the trust bestowed upon him by the royal family to implement the King's vision of gradual, progressive changes. Minister of Commerce and Industry Abdullah Alireza reportedly views Khoja as his partner on IPR issues. This partnership will be important for achieving USG objectives on IPR protection.
ERDMAN